

Opinion of the European Economic and Social Committee on The role of railway stations in the cities and conurbations of an enlarged EU

(2006/C 88/03)

On 10 February 2005, the European Economic and Social Committee, acting under Rule 29(2) of its Rules of Procedure, decided to draw up an opinion on: The role of railway stations in the cities and conurbations of an enlarged EU.

The Section for Transport, Energy, Infrastructure and the Information Society, which was responsible for preparing the Committee's work on the subject, adopted its opinion on 31 January 2006. The rapporteur was Mr Tóth.

At its 424th plenary session, held on 14-15 February 2006 (meeting of 14 February), the European Economic and Social Committee adopted the following opinion by 139 votes to 2, with 4 abstentions.

1. Recommendations

1.1 The European Economic and Social Committee urges that its recommendations should be included in the material being developed in response to the currently ongoing review of the *White Paper on European transport policy for 2010: time to decide* (COM(2001) 370).

1.2 An in-depth examination of the place of international passenger railway stations within the railway infrastructure is needed, particularly given their multiple roles as urban amenities and as part of railway networks and of Europe's architectural heritage.

1.3 There must be broad consultation of the public and of expert opinion on the needs to be met by stations, taking into account 21st century technological and technical developments. Options for regulatory arrangements must be worked out at regional, Member State and EU level, based on actual needs and with due regard to the subsidiarity principle.

1.4 EU legislation must take account of public expectations of international railway stations with regard to general improvements in passenger safety and protection from terrorist attacks.

1.5 Railway station development projects are of particular importance, given the role of such projects in helping to promote social and economic cohesion in the new Member States.

1.6 Options for funding structured development of international railway stations through public-private partnerships and other appropriate channels should be studied, with the involvement of the European Investment Bank (EIB).

1.7 It is important that railway stations should primarily fulfil their basic function as transport interchanges, rather than becoming centres for other activities such as shopping and business.

1.8 Railway station development projects must help to retain existing jobs, while boosting the creation of new jobs. Of

course, the indirect effects as well as the direct effects of such projects must be taken into account.

1.9 The maintenance and development, not only of railway stations in large cities and of those serving international traffic, but also of railway stations used by people living in particularly disadvantaged regions, should be made a priority.

2. Introduction

2.1 To put it succinctly, stations are a kind of shop window for railway transport.

2.2 The 2001 White Paper on *European transport policy for 2010: time to decide* (COM(2001) 370) left the overall aims of EU transport policy fundamentally unchanged, except in that it placed greater emphasis on developing modes of transport capable of easing the burden on road transport systems and made transport policy more customer-oriented.

2.3 Railway stations play a key role in the free movement of goods, persons and services. They can help to ensure that passenger transport is available to all, and is as fast, efficient and smooth as possible. The smooth functioning of the internal market, the cutting back of red tape and a level playing field for competition are possible requirements for this to happen.

2.4 An EU transport policy is an important means of achieving economic and social cohesion, particularly with regard to ensuring fair competition, improving the safety of transport, and from the point of view of environmental issues.

2.4.1 On the subject of revitalising the railways, the White Paper notes that the railway transport sector is complex in nature. On the one hand, there are high-performance high-speed rail networks serving their passengers from modern stations; on the other, there are antediluvian services, often releasing passengers into dilapidated and unsafe stations, together with a mixture of local lines and crowded long-distance trains, which sometimes arrive late.

2.4.2 The White Paper suggests using investments to encourage integration of the high-speed train network with air transport, particularly with regard to stations handling airport traffic. At several points, the document refers to the role of stations in providing services to facilitate passengers' journeys, particularly with regard to baggage transport.

2.5 Adoption of the EU's first and second railway packages⁽¹⁾ has enabled continuous progress in the liberalisation of freight transport and harmonisation of quality standards. The EESC hopes that the third railway package will deliver similar results. The European Union still needs to adopt and implement measures in the field of passenger transport. The recommendations set out in this opinion tie in with the development of standards for international passenger transport and application of such standards within Member States.

3. The regulatory environment

3.1 The European Communities have adopted various regulations and directives on railway transport, such as the regulation establishing a European Railway Agency⁽²⁾, and the directives on railway safety⁽³⁾, infrastructure⁽⁴⁾, allocation of capacity⁽⁵⁾, interoperability⁽⁶⁾ and development of the Community's railways⁽⁷⁾. The above legislation is at best only of incidental relevance to railway stations.

3.2 The Commission is primarily concerned with harmonising technical standards (e.g. standardising the height of platforms to enable persons with reduced mobility to use them —

⁽¹⁾ First railway package: Directive 2001/12/EC — OJ L 75 of 15.03.2001, p. 1 — EESC opinion — OJ C 209 of 22.07.1999, p. 22; Directive 2001/13/EC — OJ L 75 of 15.03.2001, p. 26 — EESC opinion — OJ C 209 of 22.07.1999, p. 22; Directive 2001/14/EC — OJ L 75 of 15.03.2001, p. 29 — EESC opinion — OJ C 209 of 22.07.1999, p. 22.

Second railway package: Directive 2004/51/EC — OJ L 164 of 30.04.2004, p. 164 — EESC opinion — OJ C 61 of 14.03.2003, p. 131; Directive 2004/49/EC — OJ L 164 of 30.04.2004, p. 44 — EESC opinion — OJ C 61 of 14.03.2003, p. 131; Regulation (EC) No 881/2004 — OJ L 164 of 30.04.2004, p. 1 — EESC opinion — OJ C 61 of 14.03.2003, p. 131; Directive 2004/50/EC — OJ L 164 of 30.04.2004, p. 114 — EESC opinion — OJ C 61 of 14.03.2003, p. 131.

Third railway package: COM(2004) 139 final, COM(2004) 142 final, COM(2004) 143 final, COM(2004) 144 final, COM(2004) 140 final and SEC(2004) 236.

⁽²⁾ Directive 2004/881/EC — OJ L 164, 30.4.2004, p. 1 — EESC Opinion — OJ C 61, 14.3.2003, p. 131.

⁽³⁾ Directive 2004/49/EC — OJ L 164, 30.4.2004, p. 44 — EESC Opinion — OJ C 61, 14.3.2003, p. 131.

⁽⁴⁾ Directive 2004/881/EC — OJ L 164, 30.4.2004, p. 1 — EESC Opinion — OJ C 61, 14.3.2003, p. 131.

⁽⁵⁾ Directive 2001/12/EC — OJ L 75 of 15.3.2004, p. 1 — EESC opinion — OJ C 209 of 22.7.2002, p. 22, and Directive 2004/51/EC — OJ L 164 of 30.4.2004, p. 164 — EESC opinion — OJ C 61 of 14.3.2002, p. 131.

⁽⁶⁾ Directive 2004/50/EC — OJ L 164, 30.4.2004, p. 114 — EESC Opinion — OJ C 61, 14.3.2003, p. 131.

⁽⁷⁾ COM(2004) 139 final, amending Directive 91/440/EEC on the development of the Community's railways.

Directive 2001/16/EC). Promoting interoperability involves harmonisation in technical areas such as railway electricity supply networks and safety networks, as well as harmonisation of certification requirements for engine drivers. The current competitive disadvantage of railways has partly to do with the fact that trains are held up at the borders of certain countries due to differing technical standards (e.g. gauge, technical modifications to locomotives, changeover of train crews).

3.3 Directives focussing on the rights and safety of passengers are particularly relevant to the subject of railway stations (e.g. 2001/16/EC). These include the directives in the third railway package, which are aimed at enforcing passengers' rights, partly by ensuring that tickets (which should be refundable, wherever possible) can be purchased conveniently and in good time; when purchasing tickets, passengers must be aware of the conditions applying to a given type of ticket and of other relevant information. The directives also aim to improve passenger safety, both in city stations and in trains, which outside peak hours are often the scene of violent crime. The introduction of higher safety standards and the availability of help by railway staff working in stations and on trains in dealing with unpleasant incidents would certainly encourage more people to use railways.

3.4 The EESC is closely following the Commission's work, and in the field of rail transport it has produced opinions on issues such as social aspects, financing considerations, metropolitan regions and trans-European transport networks⁽⁸⁾.

4. Railway stations and intermodality

4.1 Railway stations as intermodal interchanges

4.1.1 The impetus to reverse the gradual sidelining of railways in urban life came from high-speed trains such as TGVs, HSTs and ICEs and also from the Trans-European Networks (TENs), which were conceived in parallel to these, during the same period. Once railway transport became feasible over distances (600-800 km) for which flying had been the only real option until then, there was a change not only in the number of passengers using stations but also in their composition, thus enhancing the value of railway stations for cities.

4.1.2 The second factor which could bring change to railway stations as transport interchanges has less to do with the role of high-speed trains than with changes in the function of suburbs in conurbations, where mono-functional dormitory towns could give way to multi-poled, multifunctional urban areas. All of these, together with an awareness that road building cannot necessarily keep up with suburban commuter car traffic, have focused attention on the need to integrate urban and suburban public transport, for example through

⁽⁸⁾ CESE 130/2005, CESE 131/2005, CESE 119/2005, CESE 120/2005, CESE 257/2005, CESE 1426/2004, CESE 225/2005, CESE 968/2004.

cooperation between transport companies, coordination of timetables, fares and ticketing, and shared use of passenger transport facilities. At the same time, one of the lessons of the societal unrest experienced in the suburbs of Paris in late 2005 is that many different tools must be used continuously over time in the interests of social cohesion, and that the relevant processes are not yet over.

4.1.3 Suburban railways are an important part — and in some cases even the backbone — of such networks. In view of this, railway stations are ideally suited to playing a key role in systems for providing passengers with information and serving as mobility centres in complex and intersecting transport networks.

4.1.4 Although high-speed trains do not usually stop at railway stations served by suburban trains, a tendency to encourage integration has brought the two processes together, and in newly built or renovated stations modern and high-quality intermodality between international and national lines, and also between the latter and urban transport, is emerging as a basic requirement.

4.2 *Defining trans-European intermodality standards*

4.2.1 The standards and requirements to be met by railway stations are being developed. In the past, railway stations helped to bring nations together and to shape national identity. This common sense of identity was not formed by the physical structure of the railway network, although tracks and rails were an essential part of it, but by stations, by rules, models and standards.

4.2.2 Harmonisation of TEN railway stations is not the goal. Nowadays, European identity should be expressed by setting standards for services, and not by standardising buildings. One of the most important of these standards should concern development of intermodal connections in such a way as to preserve the diversity of local instruments while complying with quality requirements on provision of information to passengers in a multilingual Europe and helping them to complete their journeys. Three areas deserve special mention: the quality of information provided to passengers, standards for intermodal connections, and development of the role of mobility centres.

4.2.3 Although these quality requirements for user-friendly services should be adopted as European recommendations or guidelines for the TEN stations concerned, they should not be seen as a prerogative of the network, and there must be full compliance with the subsidiarity principle. Obviously, it should not be a problem if other stations and interchanges apply the standards thus developed, as, rather than undermining the quality of transport services, this should actually enhance it.

5. Models for development

5.1 International comparisons show that practically no two countries are the same in terms of starting points for railway station redevelopment, initiated by various combinations of top-down government action and market developments, and motivated by a range of urban development and transport needs. In Great Britain, where redevelopment of railway stations was entrusted solely to the market, these changes were restricted to: (a) railway sites, (b) central London, (c) the property boom period, and (d) construction of new office buildings.

5.2 In Switzerland an environmentally-aware programme has been launched for the modernisation of the railway network and public transport, including S-Bahn (suburban rail network) systems (in Zürich, Basel, Bern). Although the railway's financial problems meant that commercial use had to be made of property in the vicinity of stations, this was done not by means of selling off properties but through programmes, drawn up jointly in cooperation with the railways and taking into account the interests of developers, municipalities, government and railways.

5.3 In Sweden, development was initiated by the railways (which have been privatised, but not split up) in partnership with local authorities. The aim was to create modern travel centres, with trains, buses, taxis and car parks all under one roof. Both local authorities and various other modes of transport were affected by these arrangements.

5.4 In France, the main impetus has come from the centrally-taken decision to build up the TGV network, representing an opportunity to develop links with Paris. The local level was involved in the process of lobbying for stations.

5.5 In the Netherlands, the railways and environmental and transport authorities announced a programme in 1986 to concentrate activity in the surroundings of railway stations, in keeping with the principle of compact urban development and of support for public transport. Before privatisation of the railways, it was extremely difficult for the railways and local authorities to get other partners on board.

5.6 The above examples show that, from the very start, planning must reflect the role of stations both as interchanges (the transport dimension) and as an embodiment of 'local' values (the urban dimension), rather than a one-sided approach. Similarly, the needs of the market and financing considerations must be balanced by a wider view reflecting the interests of cities and networks, to help prevent situations in which short-term economic interests take the upper hand, or, at the other extreme, visionary plans fail to take financing issues into account. Specialised studies suggest that it is easier to reach consensus when stations are built on new sites (Lille); otherwise, the many interests and counter-interests which already exist are often a barrier to progress.

6. Development trends in the EU

6.1 There are good reasons in favour of cross-sectoral cooperation in the European Commission, providing officials with an overview of projects financed by Structural Funds within each specific sector. Such an overview will enable analysis of EU funding by sector, so that the amount of expenditure within each sector/area of activity can be determined.

6.2 It seems important to keep sight of the impact which the contradictory blend of traditional and modern characterising modern rail travel has had on the development of high-speed railways. Indeed, in the process of breaking out of conventional railway networks, high-speed networks have attracted a great deal of attention. Given that development of such networks is extremely costly, it is possible that they may have diverted funding from other projects. For example, in France the condition of some sections of the conventional railway infrastructure has, as a result of TGV projects, deteriorated to such an extent that speed limits have had to be introduced in many parts of the network. As a result, both passenger and freight transport is seriously held up; it is debatable whether this is compensated for by the faster journey times enjoyed by passengers on high-speed trains.

6.3 Developing conventional railway lines and encouraging more people to use them is a much more effective means of supporting the objectives of social cohesion and the integration of backward regions, given that high-speed trains merely rush through such regions, without offering any scope for their integration into transport networks. As well as building high-speed lines, it would sometimes be more useful to upgrade conventional railway transport services and infrastructure. The primary interface between such development or renovation and passengers is the railway station.

7. Redevelopment of railway stations

7.1 There is a serious danger that major investments governed by short-term interests — and indeed pure property speculation — could jeopardise the real contribution which railways can offer passengers and cities, for example in the case of operating losses by railways being used to justify the selling-off of valuable city-centre properties, leading to the construc-

tion of office buildings and shopping centres on former railway sites. In view of this, the following considerations should be taken into account:

7.2 Direct connections between city centres are vital not only for high-speed trains but for all international routes, including all sections of the trans-European transport network.

7.3 Development of a dense network of public transport links providing smooth connections between railway stations and all parts of the city is particularly called for in city centres.

7.4 Railway stations serve as mobility and information centres for the various forms of transport which make up the transport network.

7.5 Connections should also be developed between city-centre railway stations and the city airport.

7.6 Valuation of railway property should also take account of its role in the urban landscape and its logistical role, in order to ensure maximum long-term gain for cities.

7.7 Experience shows that the distinction between transport functions and those related to the urban landscape is gradually becoming blurred, and that railway stations are emerging as both profitable and attractive public spaces by incorporating a wide range of urban services.

7.8 That said, existing main stations are not necessarily the best locations for future high-speed railway stations. Judging by the most successful instances to date, the best way of combining the energies released by regeneration of the railways and urban development is to establish new urban centres within cities, but as an alternative to traditional city centres (however, it should also be noted that the most frequently cited examples, such as Lille, are all special cases, with circumstances that could hardly be reproduced elsewhere).

7.9 Past experience generally suggests that the State, local authorities and private capital can, in cooperation with the railways, put in place development projects involving modernisation of international railway stations in such a way as to reflect a wide range of interests.

Brussels, 31 January 2006.

The President
of the European Economic and Social Committee
Anne-Marie SIGMUND